

# Uncle Sam Hot on the Trail of Food Crooks

## Fakers and Short Weight Dealers Given Short Shift as Federal Agents Strive to Improve Conditions

*"Which I wish to remark,  
And my language is plain,  
That for ways that are dark  
And for tricks that are vain,  
The heathen Chinese is peculiar."*

By H. O. BISHOP

THUS wrote Bret Harte many years ago in portraying the questionable peculiarities of the Celestials who frequented the mining camps of the Pacific Coast country. What Harte said of the "heathen Chinese" concerning "ways that are dark and tricks that are vain" could be applied with equal propriety and justice in this exciting year of 1920 to certain business gentry who are white—at least as to skin—and who call themselves Americans. They are designated by some as "Food Crooks."

It's hard to believe there are persons in this country who are so wildly eager to make money that they will stoop to sell putrid, fake and short weight food, and collect the highest prices for it.

The fact that many not only exist but flourish makes it necessary for the United States Government to maintain, at heavy expense, a Bureau of Chemistry, as a branch of the Department of Agriculture. The head of this bureau is Dr. C. L. Alsberg, who is known throughout the country as the arch enemy of food crooks. Dr. Alsberg takes the position that the public is entitled to pure food and proper weight and quantity and he is going to see that they get it. So closely has he kept on the trail of the most notorious of the food crooks that a great many of them either have reformed and decided to be decent, or have retired from business entirely.

At one time or another some one has tried to put over some sort of rank fraud in connection with practically every article sold in grocery or drug stores. The housewives of America can be of material assistance to the government authorities by carefully reading the labels on all packages of food they purchase. They can see at a glance how much food they are to get for their money when it is in package form and labeled in accordance with the provisions of the Federal Food and Drug Act. This act provides that all food in package form, shipped into interstate or foreign commerce, shall bear on the label a plain and conspicuous statement of the quantity of the contents of the package in terms of weight, measure or numerical count. If it is not up to the proper weight, measure, or quality, the purchaser is warranted in demanding immediate adjustment and communicating with the Bureau of Chemistry at Washington.

The variety and quantity of foods put up and sold in package form have increased rapidly in recent years. Nearly every kind of food may now be bought in can, box, bottle, basket, case, carton, sack or other form of package. Canned fruits, vegetables and meats long have been on the market and can be obtained at all grocery stores. Other foods regularly sold in large quantities in package form are coffees, teas, spices, flavoring extracts, baking powders, sirups, vinegars, jams, jellies, preserves, flour, olive oil, candy, catsup, bakery products, butter, cheese, breakfast foods, fresh fruits and vegetables and beverages.

One of the most flagrant frauds has been perpetrated under the name of olive oil. Real olive oil is worth between \$4 and \$5 a gallon, and is difficult to secure even at that price. On the other hand cottonseed oil, peanut oil, soy bean oil, corn oil, and other vegetable oils range in price from \$1 to \$1.92 a gallon, and are plentiful. Here the food crooks saw and have taken advantage of a chance to reap a get-rich-quick harvest. They buy the cheap oils, with which they fill shapely bottles labeled "olive oil" and sell them to an unsuspecting public at the price of genuine olive oil.

But as a result of a large number of seizures by Alsberg's men, the practice has been pretty well broken up. Some dealers, however, are endeavoring to continue to reap the large profits involved and hope to escape the penalties of the Food and Drug Act by so wording the labels of their products as to convey the impression to the consumer that the product is olive oil without stating definitely on the label that it is olive oil. These products are commonly labeled as "salad oil" or "table oil," or some other indefinite kind of oil. On the labels are displayed conspicuous pictures of olive trees, or maps of Italy or other devices intended to suggest olive oil. In some instances the words "cottonseed oil" or "corn oil" are printed in very small type in an inconspicuous place on the label. A cursory reading of the label, such as is usually given by retail purchasers, would lead the average person to believe that the product was olive oil. Only the most



Above—DR. C. L. ALSBERG, Chief of the Bureau of Chemistry, of the United States Department of Agriculture.  
Below This is the inspection laboratory of the Bureau of Chemistry, where suspected food is analyzed.

careful scrutiny and exact reading will reveal that the product is not labeled olive oil, and in fact is not olive oil.

Cottonseed oil and the other oils mentioned are palatable and nutritious, and there is not the least objection to their use, provided they are sold as such and olive oil prices are not charged for them.

A prolific source of law violation is among milk dealers. It has ever been a strong temptation to mix well or creek water with pure milk, thus adding to the sum total of gallons and currency. Upon observing an undue paleness in the complexion of their daily supply of milk, city dwellers can effect a prompt rectification by dropping a brief note to the Bureau of Chemistry at Washington.

Eggs keep the authorities constantly on the jump. You might as well expect a dealer in eggs to pull a perfectly sound front tooth out of his own, or his sweetheart's, jaw, as to expect him voluntarily to junk a few cases of ancient and highly scented eggs. Dealers seem to feel justified in passing them on to a gullible and long-suffering public. Dr. Alsberg, however, is waging an especially determined fight along that line, and wherever the court decides an egg case in his favor a huge fire follows.

The practice of making three pounds of red pepper grow where only two pounds grew before, by the generous use of red cedar sawdust, has been virtually stamped out by the Alsberg sleuths. The use of ground hulls in black pepper has likewise been brought to an end.

Blackberryless "blackberry juice" is one of the frauds recently uncovered. It consisted of an apple product diluted with artificially colored water, and contained no blackberry whatsoever.

The little scheme of adulterating oysters sold in bulk by adding water has been forced into disuse. Paying for water at oyster prices was a good thing for the dealer but hard on the buyers' wallet.

An enterprising nickel-skinner in the gelatin business sought to bulge his bank account abnormally by mixing ordinary everyday furniture glue with his gelatin. He ceased, however, when Mr. Alsberg convinced him that his glue contained a lot of zinc

and copper, which was not conducive to healthy stomachs.

A few manufacturers of apple butter and canners of tomatoes just naturally haven't the heart to throw away such portions of their stock as are decomposed. They seem to feel and hope there is enough good to overcome the bad, and therefore dump it all into the kettles. Keen regret is theirs when their unsavory mess is investigated by the officials, and they are ordered to burn it on the junk heap.

A nice bubbling spring on one's premises is frequently a temptation to peddle it to the public in pretty glass bottles guaranteeing it to cure such annoying trifles as gout, indigestion, diabetes, Bright's disease, rheumatism, lung trouble, and other disorders too numerous to mention. It sells rapidly and brings home much coin of the realm. But the Bureau of Chemistry is now keeping an eye on all spring water purveyors.

Several shipments of butter have been seized recently on the charge that it contained too much water or salt and too little milk fat. The sale of water and salt at the price of butter is not only a fraud upon the consumer and an unnecessary burden in these times of high prices, but is demoralizing to the butter industry.

The standard for butter which is used as a guide by the Federal and most of the state and city food officials requires that butter shall contain not less than 82.5 per cent milk fat. This leaves 17.5 per cent for salts, coloring matter and moisture. On the average something less than 16 per cent will represent moisture.

The adulteration by a comparatively few manufacturers of such high priced food as butter with water, which costs them nothing, places the great body of honest manufacturers at a disadvantage in competing in price to the wholesale trade. The man who puts excess water in his butter can cut the price to the dealer sufficiently to get the business and still make more than a fair profit. The cut price, however, seldom reaches the consumer, since the additional water is not apparent and the butter is usually sold for the regular market price. The manufacturer and the dealer thus divide between them the profit on water sold at from 50 to 90 cents a pound, which on the whole is quite profitable. The dealer does not always know that the butter contains too much water and too little butter fat. He quite naturally prefers to buy butter that appears to

be good and which is offered to him at a few cents lower than he can buy it elsewhere, since he can sell it for the full market price.

Excess water in butter results usually either from lack of care and facilities for controlling it, or from a deliberate intention to put in as much water as the traffic will bear. In either case Mr. and Mrs. Ultimate Consumer pay butter prices for plain water.

Making last year's lima beans look as fresh as though just plucked from the garden, and selling them at the high price of fresh beans, is a species of crookedness that has been stopped. The *modus operandi* was to soak the old beans until they assumed a nice tender greenish appearance.

Sauerkraut is generally considered bad enough in its virgin purity. You can imagine how it must look, smell and taste when adulterated. Many kraut dealers were brought to tow by the government for tampering with its purity.

That portion of the populace whose chief delight during the cool nights of autumn and winter is the toasting of marshmallows at an open fireplace will be aroused to learn that some dealers are in the habit of shortweighting them. It therefore behooves the fraternity of marshmallowists to see that the actual weight tallies with that printed on the label to be found on the end of the box.

It is well-nigh beyond human belief that any one, just for the sake of money, would try to put over a deal on babies engaged in sprouting their first crop of teeth. Yet such is the case. A firm put forth a medicine which they claimed was a cure for teething and cholera infantum, summer complaint, colic and griping. Upon analyzing the mixtures the Bureau of Chemistry found it to be: "A dark brownish-red, thick, syrupy liquid of a sweet flavor suggesting licorice, but no glycyrrhizin could be identified. Odor suggested oil of wintergreen and anise. It contained about 52 per cent solid matter, mostly sugar, about 11 per cent alcohol, and some morphine and chloroform."

What a mixture to put into the stomachs of helpless little babies!

The wild craze for making money quickly is a strange malady.